

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 88*

# **Buddhist Tales from Sanskrit Sources**

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*Ratna Handurukande*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# **Buddhist Tales from Sanskrit Sources**

Retold by

**Ratna Handurukande**

## **Bodhi Leaves No. 88**

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# Buddhist Tales from Sanskrit Sources

## The Story of the Five Sages

Once upon a time, the Bodhisattva was born in a distinguished brahmin family. He grew up in size as well as virtue, lending further distinction to his kith and kin. Unattracted by sensual pleasures even in the prime of his life, he renounced the household, and lived in a quiet hermitage. There, he had four friends, a crow, a pigeon, a snake, and a deer, who were noted for their righteous deeds and superior goodness.

One day, as these four friends were engaged in conversation, one of them raised a question, "Friends, what do you think is the greatest misery in the world?" The crow spoke first and said that it was hunger, for it is to satisfy this that even the innocent deer, who live in the border of the forest, are killed by hunters, for flesh. Pointing out that people suffering the pangs of hunger eat even shrivelled wood, dry grass, or impure food full of worms, he referred to the instance of the great sage Visvāmitra eating dog's flesh because of hunger.

The pigeon agreed, saying, “It is true. The misery of hunger is intense.” But he declared that passion alone was the greatest misery, for even sages, who live on air, water and withered leaves, become blind, their powers arrested, because of passion, the arising of which they cannot prevent. He explained how passion obscures modesty, stains fame, and sets aside even the fortunes of the virtuous, paying no heed to the age of men, conventions of families, or the talk of people. Illustrating his statements, he spoke of timid women, who normally become frightened even on hearing the sound of music inside their houses during the fading hours of the night, who, however, become bold because of passion and venture out alone in the night, in regions enveloped with darkness.

The snake joined the discussion, saying, “Is not passion, which causes delusion of the mind, a misery indeed? But I think anger is the greater misery for it inflames the mind.” In support of his view he pointed out how even sages, whose minds had been calmed through the practice of meditation, behaved like cruel snakes and burnt people with the fire of anger. “Anger makes people kill even their fathers, mothers and beloved friends,” he said. Citing instances of an angry Rudra burning the heavenly city of Tripura, and a wicked king cutting the gentle sage Ksāntivādin to pieces, the snake reiterated that anger was the

foremost of all miseries.

It was the chance of the deer to speak. He said, "It is well, lord of snakes, to say that this calamity of anger is severe. But I know of a greater misery, and that is the fear of death. We, the deer living in the forest, fear death even on hearing the sound of rustling grass, leaves, or sprouts, and run, unconcerned about one another, abandoning even our own beloved offspring. Helpless, we live in mountainous regions, fearing the fall of the thunderbolt of death. Our throats parched, we reach the banks of streams, but turn away without reaching the water, frightened of being killed by lions. Defenceless, we abandon forests, luxuriantly green with sprouting grass, on seeing a cruel hunter, and wander about in rugged regions of the Vindhya forest, becoming the targets of cruel tigers. Our hearts melt even when we see men made of straw. Afraid of death, we find no happiness, either during the day or during the night. Therefore, fear of death, I think, is the worst of all miseries."

A discussion followed, but the four animals could reach no agreement about the problem, for each adhered to his own statement. They came to the Bodhisattva, paid obeisance to him, and asked respectfully, "What, Blessed One, is the chief misery out of hunger, passion, anger, and the fear of death? Who among us has spoken well?" The wise sage said,

“All have spoken well. All these miseries cause pain to people in the world. But good friends, listen to me carefully. The miseries of hunger, passion, anger, and the fear of death—these and whatever other types of miseries there are, they follow birth. The scorching impurities associated with birth vie with one another, as it were, and cause endless misery to undiscerning people. Since all miseries arise from arriving at the condition of birth, that alone is the greatest misery. Therefore, I advise you, friends, to practise firm vigilance to gain enlightenment, and to strive quickly for the complete destruction of existence.” The four animals, their heads bent low through reverence, accepted the advice of that best of sages, and lived even more righteously than before.

## **A Merchant Story**

Once, the Bodhisattva was born as a rich and prosperous merchant. Blessed though he was with an abundance of wealth, when some merchants set out on a voyage he accompanied them, with the sole intention of saving his friends should they face distress. Shortly after they set out on the ocean, there was thunder and lightning; strong winds blew, a storm raged, and the sea became more violent than it

would during the age of destruction. Waves as high as mountains, cleft asunder by the force of winds, seemed to swallow the heavens, along with the sun, the moon, and the stars. Aware of the danger to their lives, the merchants became speechless through fear. Despondent, they went to the Bodhisattva, their faces bereft of lustre. They spoke to him, stammering, their voices choked with tears. "We have abandoned all effort, resting our hopes on you. Help us, Lord, and delay not, for there is danger to our lives right now. Never has anyone following your footsteps met with disaster. Moreover, there are no regions belonging even to the gods, where your powers do not prevail. This ship, beaten by the water, will crumble to pieces in a moment. Protect us, the miserable and helpless ones, you of unfailing might."

Distressed on seeing the misfortune of his friends, and aware that the calamity they faced was dreadful and without remedy, the compassionate Bodhisattva spoke, consoling them. "Oceans do not drown the dead," he said. "Everyone knows that. Therefore, cling to my dead body and cross the ocean, unruffled, casting away dejection and sorrow." The merchants were impressed by this, his marvellous act of sacrifice. However, distressed at the thought of losing him, they said, "All of us would readily face death, right here in this dreadful ocean, but we cannot do such as ignoble

deed. Therefore, refrain from this rashness, strong-minded one. What is the use of wealth or life for us, at the cost of an excellent friend like you, so very rare to find? Who will deliver us, sunk in the whirlpool of misdeeds, even if we rescue ourselves from this flood of water? It is the fruition of our past action that has now come to the fore, as a result of which this misfortune has occurred. Noble one, this, your glorious act, will move even a monster to thoughts tender with compassion. How can we, your friends, not be affected?"

The Bodhisattva, his love and kindness enhanced all the more by these friendly words, spoke again, pacifying his friends. "Sudden misfortunes, even of enemies, would I prevent at the cost of my life, how much more those of you, dear friends, whom I cherish with love and respect! Were it but an insect that would be happy with my body, pathless and filthy, I would even then sacrifice my body willingly, as one would dry grass. What then is so wonderful in this instance of my abandoning a single body, compassionately, for the good of friends, whose minds are sanctified by righteousness? If I do not use this body to gain virtue which yields incomparable happiness, of what use is it, a carcass, shunned and feeble, so much like a bubble in the ocean whirled by the wind? Unsolicited by you, dear friends, and for my own well-being, will I



abandon this worthless object, the perishable body. If I do not rescue you from this ocean so hard to cross, how can I save the world from the ocean of *saṃsāra*? This is no disaster at all for me. I have, on the contrary, found a permanent remedy for misfortunes. After using my body to protect you, sirs, I shall certainly gain a body of virtue, which cannot be torn asunder, cut up or carried away, a body which is imperishable, unscarred and unsurpassed. Therefore, friends, if you entertain any feeling of true friendship and tender affection towards me, pray do not obstruct this, my act of virtue. But, sirs, set aside confusion now, lay hold of my body as you would a raft, cling to one another, and arrive at a safe spot, led by the speed of the water or by the wind. There, support your lives with leaves, roots, fruit, water and the like; fulfil your duties, unflinching in your friendship towards one another; and lead righteous lives, contemplating the nature of this world.”

Thus, though restrained by friends with tears streaming from their eyes, the Bodhisattva gave up concern for his own life, and declared his intention to achieve peace for all beings in this manner. “I have no need of celestial splendour, let alone any other pleasures, changeable, perishing, illusory as dreams. Nor do I wish to leave aside the world of human beings and enjoy the bliss of tranquillity, because of

this virtuous deed. On the other hand, may I, through this act of virtue, rescue all helpless beings immersed in the ocean of *saṃsāra*, which is turbid with passion, and is shaken by the wind of sorrow.” The Bodhisattva, his mind as firm as iron, made this unshakable vow, and then split his own belly with a knife, in order to rescue his friends, his heart perturbed by their pains and sorrows.

Then were heard auspicious sounds, words of applause of the gods, the vidyādhara, the yakṣas and the rakṣasas. Flowers from celestial gardens, blown gently by cool breezes, fell on him. Serpents emerging from the ocean, their expanded hoods lustrous with bright gems, paid homage to him. The body of the Lord, lovely to look at though bereft of life, bright like polished gold, lay radiant, as though held up with delight by the goddess of fortune. The merchants, their faces gloomy, and eyes red with tears, clung to that body, and crossed the ocean, taking recourse to the strength of the Bodhisattva’s vow.

## **The Story of King Sarvamdada**

The Bodhisattva ruled over a certain kingdom, which he had inherited from his family. He was very kind

and generous, and became known by the name Sarvamdada, "All-giver," a name fitting in meaning, for he gave much satisfaction to people by his gifting of wealth. As he ruled righteously, an enemy king, who, being dissatisfied with the splendour of his own kingdom, coveted that of Sarvamdada, came to oust him from his throne.

Seeing his city besieged by a multitude of royal soldiers, Sarvamdada thought, "I am capable of destroying the entire army of the enemy, single-handed. But, of what use is that glory gained by a wretch who resorts to the killing of an enemy? If another king desires my kingdom, should I not honour him? Verily, I bear this state of kingship, a burden of misery, for the welfare of others. I should honour this enemy king as if he were a guest, because of my abundant virtue and characteristic compassion. Or else, I should treat him like a child who has to be guided. If I entertain anger towards him, who indeed forcibly releases me from the misfortune called kingship, then what other wicked person would be equal to me? They who are interested in their own welfare should give up the glory and splendour of kingship. Therefore, I shall go to the peaceful forests, which abound in happiness born of solitude, forsaking the vain glory of kingship."

So resolving, the Bodhisattva left the kingdom and

went to the forest, where he lent splendour to a quiet and secluded hermitage. There he experienced an imperishable happiness, not attained earlier through kingly pleasures. Fanned by forest breezes, scented with the fragrance of flowers, he dispelled the weariness of his body, and reflecting on royal glory sullied with evil, he fostered in his mind the desire of emancipation alone. Riches, fickle by nature, manifold in evil, and constantly frightful, lead not our minds to wisdom at all. On the other hand, the thoughts of the good, who retire to the forest, the agitation of their minds extinct, grow in virtue.

At this time, a certain brahmin, afflicted with the misery of poverty and desirous of obtaining wealth, set out towards the kingdom of the Bodhisattva. Losing his way, he wandered here and there, and reached the hermitage, hungry and weary. The Bodhisattva greeted him, treated him with tenderness and affection, and asked him the reason for his arrival. The brahmin said, "I am on my way to the kingdom of Sarvamdada, the sole protector of those suffering misfortune, the only kinsman of the mendicants." The Bodhisattva heaved a long sigh and spoke to the brahmin. "Think of some other means to appease your misery, twice-born one. That king has resorted to a penance grove, his kingdom gone and power lost." Hearing this, the brahmin fell to the ground, bereft of

his senses. Sprinkling some cool water on him, the Bodhisattva revived him and spoke, consoling him. "There is yet another way, brahmin, to effect the fulfilment of your hopes. I am King Sarvamdada. Grieve not, for the king who usurped my kingdom is looking for me all over. Bind me, therefore, and hand me to him. He shall make you content." "Very well," said the sinful brahmin, his mind infatuated with greed.

That brahmin bound the Bodhisattva firmly like a thief, and dragged him along, ignoring the laments of forest deities and pious ascetics. He took the Bodhisattva, who in manner was fearless, calm and judicious, and entered the city, where stood the enemy king. Seeing the Bodhisattva, the wicked king thought, his mind confounded with sudden fright, "Who indeed is this here, chest beautiful like a slab of gold, belly slender, arms hanging down like snakes with hoods expanded? He is but a youth, yet wise in discipline and manner. From where has he descended, virtue incarnate as it were, clad in a garment of bark, pleasing to the eye? Bound be he indeed, but humbled he is not, by sorrow and despair."

Then that lowest of brahmins spoke to the enemy king, "Victory! Great king, victory! This person, hostile to you, had come to the forest, and was planning to attack your kingdom. I tied him up forcibly and

brought him like a struggling fish.” Disapproving the deed of that evil-doer, the enemy king spoke, “God forbid, brahmin! This king, best among the mighty, is able to win the whole earth, with only his arms as an aid. How were you able to defeat him, you wretch?” Then the brahmin related the incident as it really happened. The king unfastened the bonds of the royal sage, made him sit comfortably, and spoke reverently. “Rule over your city as of old, king. We are intent on following your commands. Forgive us our crime by exercising restraint.” The Bodhisattva said. “Of no use for me, again, are pleasures of kingship, fickle, empty, affording no comfort, gateways to enmity, pain, dejection, wretchedness and strife.” The enemy king, whose heart was moved by the Bodhisattva’s virtue, was himself inclined to go to the forest. Understanding the intention of the enemy king, who had become submissive because of guidance, the Bodhisattva accepted his kingdom, which he ruled righteously, and gave the brahmin wealth, much more than he desired.

## **Nanda the Merchant**

There used to live in the city of Sravasti a merchant called Nanda. He was very rich but being a miser, he

did not enjoy his possessions, nor did he give them to friends. He merely amassed wealth, his mind enticed by the demon of avarice. Brahmins, bearing bowls in their hands, never crossed his threshold. Nor had Nanda ever heard benedictory words of thanksgiving from mouths of mendicants. Beggars left his courtyard disappointed, their faces shrivelled. Not even crows received a lump of rice at Nanda's house.

In the course of time, Nanda fell ill, and there was no cure for his disease. Afflicted by a piercing, severe pain, Nanda felt that he was on the brink of death. He called his son and said, "Candana, dear child, I earned riches with great effort and protected them. Remember that this wealth was dear to me, and do not ever part with it."

Nanda, the doer of evil, died, and was born from the womb of an old, poor, and blind candāla woman, who had been ill a long time. Happy at his birth, the mother called one of her friends and said, "Tell me, sister, how does my child look?" Seeing the child, the second woman said, "May there be no other like him." Persuaded by the mother to describe her child, the friend said, "Like charcoal at break of day, hump-backed, flat-nosed, blind, shrivelled in limbs, such is this son of yours." The mother lamented pitifully on hearing this. Then, suddenly, as if she were angry, she flung that child upon the rough ground, his body

smearred with the filth of the womb. Being wounded afresh, the boy cried, smitten with pain.

As his karma would have it, the child grew up. When he was able to walk about, the mother gave him a broken vessel and a staff, and sent him out to beg. The beggar boy went to the house of Candana for alms. Seeing him from a distance, Candana asked the gate-keeper to chase him away. This the gate-keeper did, beating him with his cudgel and speaking harsh words. The wretch fell on the ground, his spine broken by a blow of the stick.

As the son was late to return, the mother came that way, searching for him, lamenting. "What could have happened to my little son? Could he have missed his step and fallen over a precipice? Or, has he been bitten by a dog? Could a bull have gored him to death? Or else, did he lose his way and take another path?" Recognizing the voice of the mother, the son cried louder. The mother and son met, embraced each other, and cried in agony, their laments resounding in the courtyards of the city. Meanwhile, a large crowd assembled at that place.

The Buddha entered the city at this time, his heart full of compassion. People paid obeisance to him from a distance, their heads bent low with reverence. The roads became flat and smooth, rid of rubble and



gravel. Flowers blossomed; gentle breezes, blowing softly, wafted their fragrance. The clouds formed a canopy in the sky, and a rainbow appeared like an archway. As man and nature paid homage in unison, the Blessed One sat on a thousand-petalled lotus that sprang up from below because of his merit. Addressing Candana and pointing to the caṇḍāla boy, he said, "This is Nanda, your father, who acquired wealth, his body covered with sweat, and who protected it in a niggardly manner. He does indeed consume the bitter fruits of the tree of avarice. This person of impure mind will go from this place to an evil state where live misers, their bodies burnt by blazing fires. Seeing Nanda in this condition, who will not give away riches? Who will not even cut his own limbs and distribute the flesh?" Recounting the sorrows endured by those born as petas, as hungry ghosts, because of avarice, the Blessed One said, "Moonbeams burn their bodies like fires; even the sun's rays stream forth cold; raindrops sprinkled by fragrant breezes turn to charcoal dust as soon as they touch them." Denouncing greed and avarice, he said, "For man, there is no impurity equal to greed; there is no greater offence than avarice; there is no friend like a beggar; there is no kinsman like charity." Continuing the sermon, the Buddha spoke at length in praise of liberality. Hearing the words of the Buddha and

seeing the great misfortune of Nanda, those assembled there dispelled the darkness of avarice from their minds, and increasingly practised acts of virtue like liberality.

## **The Monk Who Longed to Live**

Once, two monks reached the “Stream-entry” stage ( *sotāpatti* ) on the path to enlightenment at the same time. One of them continued to strive, and became an arahant soon afterwards. The other monk, Bhavalubdhaka, was content on being a mere stream-entrant. The arahant admonished him. “Good Sir, destroy the remaining defilements, and bring to an end all states of existence. For births are accompanied by misery. Good is hard to attain. Life is exceedingly fickle. Desires are sources of a hundred vices.” Heedless of the arahant’s advice, Bhavalubdhaka said, “Your flower-like words cannot be excelled. But, venerable sir, I wish to be born in blissful states, to enjoy pleasures, a means of compensation for the infernal misfortunes I have suffered.”

Moved to compassion by these words, the arahant spoke again, at length and persuasively. “He who, because of delusion, seeks continuance of life, his

mind attracted by the trifling pleasures of rebirth, he seeks wrongly, seeks complete pain, afflicting all the senses. States of worldly existence are full of sorrow, full of fear, full of strife. They are shunned by the wise like poisonous trees shaken by the wind, their hollows infested with snakes. Why do you, who have transgressed the misery of evil states, seek the continuance of birth? Who, desirous of living, would partake of food contaminated with poison, even if it be delicious? Has not the mind, impetuous because of the objects of the senses, been restrained by me and other noble elders? Why do you not, therefore, follow suit? If you become intoxicated with the objects of the senses, alas, you are lost. Tell me, what advantage is there for you from those evil objects? All miseries, dreadful because they descend unnoticed, dwell in the vicinity of those whose sense organs roam around the objects of the senses. It is sheer folly on your part, venerable sir, for when you need to die but once, you seek death again. Though you have seen light, you plunge into darkness once more. Having found an auspicious way, you resort to an evil path. Discarding the city of immortality, you long for another existence. Reject, long-lived one, desires, ending badly, easily effecting ruin and fear, hostile, frightening. Reject the states of worldly existence, easy targets for the arrow of misfortune. Follow the right path, which destroys

the miseries of birth.”

Bhavalubdhaka, not convinced at all, was bereft of any enthusiasm for accomplishing righteous merit. In the course of time, he died, and was reborn at Bherukaccha, as the illegitimate child of a woman whose husband was away from home. Afraid of the talk of the world, though she was fond of the son, the mother decided to get rid of the child. She called a maid and said: “Find out, my dear, how much of the night is left right now.” “It is almost dawn, lady,” the maid replied. “Come, throw away this child, ill-born to me, a miserable wretch.” The mother said so, and fell on the ground in a deep swoon, while the maid flung the child on the highway. Seeing the predicament he was in, but aware of the truth and repentant, the boy blamed himself alone. “This is no act of my mother. Nor is this, my misfortune, without cause. Having disregarded the words of one who wished me well, I experience now the misery of rebirth. They who do not honour the words of compassionate ones suffer these and hundreds of other misfortunes.” Pricked as if with needles by ants, whose fangs were sharp and dreadful, the wretch rolled again and again, his tender body grey with grains of sand.

While he was suffering pain at the city-gate, a bull who was going in advance of cattle moving out of the

city, noticed him, and stood near, protecting him until the herd went past. The boy, in the meantime, paid homage to the Buddha in his mind. Suddenly, he saw a group of men pass by. Reanimated as it were on hearing their pleasing conversation, he spoke in a soft, clear voice. "Stay a moment, good men, through compassion for me." The men asked, full of curiosity. "Who are you, and how have you come to be like this? We are devotees constantly searching for what is good." The boy said, "I have fallen into this condition, because of my desire for worldly existence. Relieve me of my misery first, good sirs, and I will speak about myself later." They took him gently in their hands, washed him and clothed him. Then, sound in body, composed in mind, he examined the four truths as perceived, destroyed all defilements, and sat cross-legged in the sky, an arahant. Full of gratitude for the devotees, and looked upon with respect by them, he related his story in detail, drawing the conclusion. "He who delights in birth delights in misery. Delighting in misery, he does not ever gain release from misery. They, pure indeed, whose minds do not pursue the desire to enjoy existence—they, the good, do indeed attain bliss, eternal, calm, and supreme." After proclaiming a minute particle of the evil effects of the sinful vice of worldly existence, the sage became extinct at once, like a fire sprinkled with water.

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# Note on the Sources

The Buddhist tales presented in this booklet were modified and translated from the Sanskrit versions found mainly in the following manuscripts: the *Avadānasārasamuccaya* held in the University Library, Cambridge; the *Jātakmālāvadāna-sūtra* held in the Tokyo University Library; and a manuscript held in the Ryukoku University in Japan. Other manuscripts held in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, the National Archives, Kathmandu, and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, were collated where parallels to individual tales were found.

The titles of the stories occurring in the Sanskrit versions are: *Rsipañcaka-jātaka*, *Sārthavāha-jātaka*, *Sarvamdada-jātaka*, *Matsaranandāvadāna* and *Bhavalubdhakāvadāna*. A critical edition of the full text of the stories, accompanied by an English translation is being prepared for publication.

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# Table of Contents

Title page	2
Buddhist Tales from Sanskrit Sources	3
The Story of the Five Sages	3
A Merchant Story	6
The Story of King Sarvamdada	10
Nanda the Merchant	14
The Monk Who Longed to Live	18
Note on the Sources	22